

A Check List for Film/Media Studies PhD Programs

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My goal here is to give a broad survey of best practices in PhD programs in Media Studies, broadly construed. This list should be useful to prospective students in considering which programs to which they might apply, to matriculated students and current faculty in marking what practices and changes might be useful in improving their program, and for administrators in evaluating existing programs, planning new ones, and making funding decisions.

Since programs and institutions vary greatly in size, scope, resources, histories, and talents, there can be no “one size fits all” for all cases. And PhDs in media studies range through a wide variety of departments and programs: stand alone Cinema Studies, Mass Communications, Cultural Studies, language and literature departments, Theatre, Art and Art History, and so forth, as well as interdisciplinary areas such as Gender Studies, various area studies, etc. But it is possible to set clear and easily recognizable goals which may then be implemented locally in different ways.

For example, to say that PhD students should ideally receive professional development in classroom teaching is a fairly accepted goal. Reaching this goal may be through formal required classes and workshops offered in the department or by the graduate school, or through a campus “teaching center” which holds annual or regular instruction on teaching and/or visits by expert observers who can give effective feedback to the beginning teacher, as well as training sessions customized to a particular department (including for example, technical instruction on projecting film, or learning software used in instruction such as Blackboard, Photoshop, etc.). Of course working as a TA and being given well supervised opportunities for grading, presentations in class, and conducting discussion groups can be the most effective, useful, and specific development in working with a professor-mentor. The specifics of implementation are less important than the systematic development of the PhD student, and the ongoing opportunity for constructive feedback about teaching.

In many cases, peer mentoring works very well, with more experienced students helping less experienced ones. But in any case, I think the overall principle should be that mentoring and professional development is a corporate/community responsibility. While it is true that the grad student/advisor bond is special and unique, the process should not just be left to individual cases. At its worst, such a system leads to professors cherry picking students they will mentor and ignoring others who then are orphaned. While the special bond of dissertation director and student must be recognized, the group responsibility for giving all students access to information, advising, etc. must also be recognized and implemented. Also, the vagaries of academic life, with sabbaticals, leaves, personal matters, and (let’s be honest, we’ve all seen it) highly neurotic faculty

behavior from time to time, make exclusively one-on-one counseling and advising unadvisable.

I've recently been asked to review some proposals for new PhD programs, so some of these remarks are aimed at faculty who may be new to thinking about these matters as they implement their programs.

Program description

- before applying, students should have available a comprehensive description of the program including anticipated program changes. This should include a realistic description of what courses are actually offered and how frequently (a list of the past two years offerings might be useful here) and the actual time to degree of students.
- the description should clearly mark milestones such as comprehensive exams, qualifying exams, dissertation prospectus approval, etc.
- the description should have a realistic discussion of financial support throughout the program: what is guaranteed, what is open for competition (and just how competitive that is), the kind and quality of TA/RA experience, etc. And at what point financial support runs out (especially crucial for international students who cannot seek employment in the US except at their school).
- during recruiting, prospective students should be able to meet with current students. It is often useful to present a typical budget for rental housing in the area, need for an auto, and other living expenses since these can vary depending on campus location.

New Student Orientation

Introduction to the faculty and what they will teach this year; opportunity for individual office visits.

- social event or meal with new students and faculty
- orientation to library, media resources, etc.
- calendar of key deadlines for the year
- peer counseling with more experienced students in the program
- clearly articulated policies on key matters such as milestones for progress, leave, etc. (including parental/maternity leave, etc).

Professional Training

- workshops should be given regularly to inform students of and prepare them for writing effective proposals for grants and fellowships, both internal and external. Effective training in obtaining external financial support not only adds luster to the student's record, it adds prestige to the program and frees up resources to help more students.
- training should be given in writing effective conference proposals and advice should be given about strategizing conference attendance.
- information about the various professional organizations, conferences, events should be readily available and published.
- At least modest support should be given to students to attend professional meetings, even if not giving a presentation. Student initiative and recognition should be rewarded.

- workshops in preparing effective conference presentations, and trial run sessions should be standard operating procedure. Good mentoring can quickly build a program's profile as students demonstrate their talent in other venues.
- For some kinds of research such as human subject interviews and ethnographic methods, additional student training is needed before the student can submit to Human Subject Review Boards or Institutional Review Boards. These procedures might be an integral part of the classroom and lab experience of social science based researchers, but unknown to humanities and arts scholars, and often a considerable negotiation is needed in the process. (At most research schools outside funding is not processed until IRB/HSRB approval is granted.)

Introduction to the field/to grad studies

This seems to be covered in vastly different ways at different schools. At its most dismal, it can be just a visiting parade of the faculty talking about themselves—a kind of beauty pageant with the virtue of introducing people and the downside of little serious content or learning. At its best, it can be a fairly comprehensive and challenging mix of readings and practical projects that build knowledge (especially of the wide diversity of the field and adjacent areas of study) and provide experience with research tools, building a cohort, and giving a sensible introduction to matters such as conceiving a research trajectory, planning travel and fieldwork, building a teaching portfolio, etc.

One significant problem is that many programs admit students at vastly different levels of previous experience, ranging from someone who has never taken formal coursework in media studies to a student who had an undergrad major and completed an MA program in the field. A customized plan for different individuals may help eliminate redundant coursework.

Introduction to the school and the community.

- Some students, especially international students from non-western cultures, can benefit from organized experiences of local culture. For example, Northwestern's office for international students offers a month long intro before fall classes that includes living with a US family, tours and events. This acclimates the student and has proven to be especially useful in preparing grads for TAing US undergrads.
- grad students should have a recognized spokesperson/advocate/representative to the faculty.

Milestones

- informational meeting on the nature of the academic job market and how to prepare for it, year by year. From selection of study and exam areas, to preparing a c.v. and writing the job letter, preparing a teaching portfolio, etc. Annual, for all students
- workshop on writing for publication and how to get published. Nuts and bolts and also strategic planning (annual)
- workshop on conference presentation, and rehearsal (annual)
- symposium of current student work (usually related to PhD dissertation)

Training in Teaching

- formal and practical training; supervision of TA experiences; feedback; opportunities to rotate through different classes; opportunities to lead discussions, grade papers, advise students in their projects, supervise lab work, and give lectures.